

For IR Public Health column

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## **Farmers Market: Public Health Will See You There!**

If you want to celebrate the health of our community, scurry on down to the farmers market.

Every week, you can enrich your diet by loading up on fresh and locally grown fruits and vegetables. You can enhance your physical activity by walking briskly among the vendors and hefting that bounty of goodies you find.

Chances are you'll bump into friends, co-workers, and relatives while you're there. Part of being healthy lies in having a good social support system, and farmers market is a wonderful place for an impromptu gabfest with people you care about.

All this isn't lost on the public health staff here at Lewis and Clark Public Health. Many of us make the market a regular part of our weekends. But we also spend time at the market in a more official capacity.

Our environmental health specialists are there to help make sure the foods you indulge in are prepared and sold with health and safety in mind.

And staff of our WIC nutrition program make special WIC benefits available to buy that fresh, local produce.

### **WIC Benefits**

WIC is a nutrition program aimed at improving the diets of pregnant women, new moms, and children up to age 5 who meet the income guidelines. Participants get benefits to buy certain foods to supplement their diets. This helps them get the nutrients they need during critical times of growth and development.

The Helena WIC Program participates in the Farm Direct Program, which is administered by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. Through Farm Direct, WIC participants can use special farmers market benefits to buy locally grown fruits and vegetables from approved local farmers.

Ultimately, the goal is to reduce some of the barriers to a healthy diet that many low-income families face.

To get the farmers market benefits, you must first qualify to participate in WIC. To do so, visit our office at 1930 Ninth Avenue or call 457-8912. More information about WIC is available at [www.wic.mt.gov](http://www.wic.mt.gov).

About half a dozen farmers have enrolled in the local Farm Direct Program so far. We invite other growers who are interested to contact WIC at the number above.

## **Food Safety**

Ever wonder if it's safe to eat that raspberry jam or cinnamon roll you bought at the farmers market?

By law, the local health department must inspect and license facilities that prepare, cook, or sell food to the public. Our environmental health specialists work with the temporary food vendors and mobile food-cart operators at the market to ensure that their food is safe to eat and unlikely to cause a nasty foodborne illness.

Certain food prepared in home kitchens isn't inspected or regulated. It can be served under an exemption in state law for "cottage foods." Vendors of cottage foods still must demonstrate to the health department that they're selling only the specific foods covered by the exemption.

Our staff also works with vendors to provide guidance on safe food handling, packaging, and labeling.

Because of the high potential for contamination, vendors cannot sell cooked or canned fruits, vegetables, or grains. Nor can they sell baked goods that require refrigeration, like egg custards and cream fillings.

Preserves must be hygienically processed, packaged, and sealed. Foods that include tomatoes, sauerkraut, pickles, or herbal vinegars or oils are not permitted unless prepared in a licensed commercial kitchen.

Vendors at our farmers market must display their certificates at their booths. So, if you want to make sure the food item you're buying has been approved for sale, ask to see the certificate.

To learn more about farmers market certificates, contact the Licensing and Inspection Program at the health department at 447-8900 or visit our website at [www.lccountymt.gov/health/licensing-inspections/food-facilities](http://www.lccountymt.gov/health/licensing-inspections/food-facilities).

See you at the farmers market!